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RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 0871
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 2868
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BISHKEK 000317

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DEPT FOR SCA/CEN (GEHRENBECK)

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SUBJECT: BRIDE KIDNAPPING: A GROWING PROBLEM IN KYRGYZSTAN

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Classified By: Amb. Marie L. Yovanovitch, Reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: The Ambassador gathered influential NGO leaders, government officials, and members of parliament to discuss the best course of action to put an end to the practice of bride kidnapping. Local media and NGOs report that bride kidnapping, though illegal, is on the rise in Kyrgyzstan. While some still try to justify the practice as a "tradition" embedded in the local culture, cases of bride kidnapping can involve rape, forced marriage, mental anguish and depression for the victim, and, in extreme cases, suicide. END SUMMARY.

A TRADITION . . .

12. (SBU) NGOs and university researchers report that the incidence of bride kidnapping is on the rise in Kyrgyzstan. While the Criminal Code specifically prohibits forced marriage, there are few, if any, reports of police enforcement of the provision. Primarily practiced among the ethnic Kyrgyz communities, bride kidnapping is the act of abducting a young female for the purpose of marrying her to the principal abductor. A 2004 Human Rights Watch report claimed that approximately 40 per cent of women in cities and 60-80 per cent of women in villages had been kidnapped. The pressure by parents to marry and start a family, the financial burden of paying the full dowry, and the desire to continue a Kyrgyz tradition are among the many reasons given to justify the act.

13. (SBU) In a typical case of bride kidnapping, a young man deemed ready for marriage chooses one of several possible brides to kidnap, often without ever meeting them. Then, the groom and a group of his male friends and relatives stalk and capture an unsuspecting victim, whisk her back to their home, and hold her captive. The groom's female relatives attempt to convince the girl to stay and marry the young man, often using psychological coercion or physical force. Typically,

the victim's parents are summoned and asked for their consent. Her parents may agree to the terms and force their daughter to stay or refuse and extract her from the hostile environment. Due to cultural norms and community pressure, it is rare for families to allow the victim to return home.

14. (SBU) There are also cases of mock abduction, staged between consenting adults to avoid a high "kalym" or dowry price or as a form of elopement. Traditionally, courting males negotiate a price with parents for their daughter's hand in marriage. When he cannot afford the expensive kalym, the groom may abduct a consenting bride, thus starting the marriage process and leaving her parents with limited bargaining powers to demand a higher dowry. In cases in which the parents do not approve, young couples may arrange a mock abduction as a form of elopement.

. . . WITH SEVERE CONSEQUENCES FOR THE VICTIMS

15. (SBU) The consequences for victims of bride kidnapping -- abducted from her school, workplace, or home and held against her will until she submits to the demands of her captors to marry an acquaintance or complete stranger -- can be severe, both physically and psychologically. Gazbubu Babaiarova, a research associate at the American University of Central Asia, described the most extreme of cases involving the abduction of underage girls, rape by the abductors, and victims committing suicide. Babaiarova told Poloff that the average age of girls kidnapped is 14-17 years old, but she knew of cases involving girls as young as twelve, usually in rural areas. She stated that many of the victims claim to have been raped, sometimes before consenting to marriage, making it nearly impossible to back out of the arrangement. During the last three years of her research, Babaiarova said

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that she had seen numerous cases of kidnap victims, feeling trapped and psychologically distraught, seeing suicide as their only way out. This often happens when parents of the victim consent to the arrangement or will not accept her back into their home once she has escaped a captor out of shame for the family, leaving her no other options.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

16. (SBU) On March 4, the Ambassador gathered members of the international and local community to discuss ways to reverse the growing trend and end the practice of bride kidnapping. International donors, leaders of local NGOs, government officials such as the chairwoman of the constitutional court, parliamentarians, and local prosecutors, discussed the history of the tradition and how it has evolved into the current situation. Babaiarova, who travels the country conducting workshops to educate communities about the psychological impact of bride kidnapping on young women and the importance of protecting women's rights, emphatically stated that there is no truth that bride kidnapping is an ancient Kyrgyz tradition and briefed the group about her latest research on the growing trend. Participants proposed amendments to the current laws to allow for more specific protection against bride kidnapping, a unified campaign to educate the population about the detrimental effect on women, additional support to shelters housing and protecting victims, and widespread training for police officers, prosecutors, and judges to ensure that law prohibiting the act is upheld and women's rights are protected.

COMMENT

17. (C) While some may be reluctant to "meddle" in a tradition apparently embedded in local culture, the participants in the Ambassador's roundtable agreed on the scope of the problem and the need to take action. The Regional Representative of

the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights agreed to hold the next working group with the goal of devising strategies and developing a plan of action to protect women's rights and prevent future tragedies associated with bride kidnapping. Peace Corps is developing bride kidnapping kits for each volunteer, so that PCVs can educate villagers at the grass roots level on the harmful effects of this practice. In addition, USAID is reviewing how a bride kidnapping component can be incorporated into appropriate programs. Post also believes that bride kidnapping meets the definition of Trafficking in Persons and should be looked at in this light. Post will continue to follow this issue and investigate ways to assist the NGO community and the government in protecting the rights of women.

LITZENBERGER